NEWS

Forest Lake / The stories old cabins could tell

By **ELIZABETH MOHR** | Pioneer Press
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In 1907, when Rudolph John Schneider bought a waterfront plot on the northwestern shore of Forest Lake, there was hardly a soul around, save for some cows.

It was rare for working-class people to own summer homes, but Schneider and some of his fellow mail carriers had the opportunity to buy lots. No one lived on the lake year-round, and the nearest neighbors were farmers.

Schneider and his son built a one-room cabin that became the family's summer getaway from their home in St. Paul.

A couple of additions, several generations and more than 100 years later, the cabin is still the family's escape.

But it's one of the few remaining historic cabins on Forest Lake, and local historians want to document it before it falls victim to demolition or plain old age.

The Washington County Historical Society has begun a survey of cabins on the lake, with particular interest in those built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Because of increasing development, the older cabins are slowly disappearing, said Brent Peterson, executive director of the historical society. A preliminary estimate indicates fewer than 100 remain.

"It would be a good time to step back and inventory and determine the relevance of these cabins," Peterson said. "How do they play into the history of the area and of Minnesota?"

The historical society sent out letters to cabin owners, but many were returned unopened because the cabins don't have mailboxes. Organizers say they will try old-fashioned door-knocking this summer.

"I've taken it upon myself to hand-deliver letters to some of the cabin owners and sit down and talk with them," said Forest Lake Mayor Stev Stegner, who is on the historical society's board of directors. "The limited number of people I've talked to are excited to tell their stories. It isn't that they've got earth-shattering stories necessarily, but there's a certain amount of lore among the families. And that history is disappearing."

Resorts began appearing on Forest Lake in the mid-1800s, and by 1897, excursion trains from St. Paul ran daily, according to Robert Goodman's "A History of Washington County," published by the historical society in 2008.

"Many lakeshore cottages were built between 1910 and 1930. By the 1920s Forest Lake was a busy place on the main road from St. Paul to Duluth, later Highway 61. Housekeeping cabins and rustic cottage resorts flourished in the 1930s and '40s as did roadside restaurants and watering holes that drew thousands of summer visitors and automobile tourists," Goodman wrote. "By 1969 the flavor of the town had changed. Interstate 35 was completed, connecting Forest Lake with the Twin Cities and making commuting much faster. Forest Lake became a bedroom community and many of the summer cottages were turned into year-round homes."

Today, a drive around the lake (which locals refer to as First, Second and Third lakes connected by channels) reveals a variety of homes, many with multi-stall garages that dwarf the Schneiders' modest cabin.

The family says that's not the only thing that has changed.

Vacations there are no longer quiet and serene. Jet skis, motorboats, water planes and vehicle traffic create quite a din.

And taxes have surged. The Schneiders bought their land for $100 and paid 33 cents in property taxes. Today, taxes are nearly $2,000.

Stegner points to the rising taxes as a reason so many historic cabins have given way to larger, year-round homes. It's difficult for people to afford a secondary home here any longer, he said.

Staying In The Family / Cabins like the Schneiders' are rare. Not only has it remained in the same family for more than a century, but it also has retained its original features: interior wood beams and a bare wood ceiling, wood siding, an outhouse, and outdoor wood shutters propped up with metal rods.

Over the years, the family made some changes. A porch was added in the 1920s, an outdoor fireplace in the 1940s and a bathroom in the 1960s. A new roof was required after the Hugo tornado of 2008.

To build the fireplace in 1946, rocks were hauled by rowboat from the north end of the lake. This year, the crumbling fireplace was torn down and the giant stones repurposed for a fire pit.

The cabin — formerly known among the Schneiders as “the cottage” — was built by hand.

It was passed down from Rudolph John Schneider to son Rudolph Charles Schneider, then to his son Richard Schneider, who is 87. He and his wife, Alma, still spend time at the cabin during the summer and have placed it in a trust for their two daughters.

“We really love this cabin,” said Richard Schneider during a recent visit there, “and we hope it stays in the family.”

For daughter Deb Ashby, who lives in Forest Lake, the cabin is her place of relaxation and reflection amidst chaos.

Losing the cabin would be a terrible emotional loss, Ashby said.

Her great-grandfather built the cabin with his own hands. Her dad spent his summers there as a baby. She celebrated her first birthday there.

The cabin’s walls hold black-and-white photos of her ancestors, and newer albums are filled with photos of her kids.

In 2005, when her father was ill, Ashby sometimes skipped a hospital visit and opted to mow the lawn at the cabin instead.

“I could ‘escape’ from the present time and be taken back to a happier time,” she wrote in an e-mail. “(My parents) still live in the house I grew up in (in St. Paul). I, of course, have many fond memories of that house, too. However, when the time comes that they have to sell it, I think I will have an easier time seeing that house go than I would the cabin.

“Maybe it’s that when you are a child, you have many more memories of summer vacation than you do of the rest of the year. I think that the lake itself has such a ‘calming’ effect. Maybe you are able to relax more there at the cabin than you are other places.”

Sharing The Stories / Lana Jean “Jeanie” Murphy bought an old resort-style cabin on Forest Lake in 1982 and has devoted herself to restoring it. She

has done her own digging into the cabin's history (it was built in 1947, and she's the fourth owner) and is excited about the historical society's survey of cabins like hers.

"I think (the history) is going to be lost one of these days. I think it's just too bad that it's becoming big homes on these lakes and the smaller places are disappearing," Murphy said. "It's history, you know. That's why I've kept this place the way it is."

Murphy's husband is the grandson of Charlie Rogers, who "built probably a hundred of these cabins," Murphy said. His family knows quite a bit about the history of cabins on the lake, and she's looking forward to sharing that with the historical society.

Once the society has gathered stories and photos of all the old cabins, organizers hope to put together a book and possibly a cabin tour for the public.

But that hinges on being able to locate the cabins and contact their owners.

"We're just looking for input from people who own cabins that are maybe historic, maybe in their eyes," Peterson said. "We want to keep their history and stories alive."

Elizabeth Mohr can be reached at 651-228-5162.

For More

To contact the Washington County Historical Society about a cabin of interest, call 651-439-5956, e-mail information@wchsmn.org or write to the society at P.O. Box 167, Stillwater, MN 55082.
To read more about the history of Forest Lake, go to projects.wchsmn.org/communities/forest-lake/.

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